

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

by Ray C. Stedman

Nothing can capture for me the mystery and the beauty of Christmas better than the carols we sing. They have the power to recreate in my imagination the scenes of the first Christmas. They seem to be able to set the atmosphere -- the crowded inn, the smelly stable, the sleeping city, the great star spilling its beauty down over the waiting earth, the lonely shepherds in the field, the blazing, sudden glory of the heavenly hosts breaking through the darkness, then the contrast of the stable in a cave with the sleeping babe and the wondering hearts that come to worship and kneel before this amazing wonder, Jesus Christ born on earth.

One carol we sing at Christmas asks the question,

"What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?"

And the chorus answers,

"This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the son of Mary."

I am sure the shepherds asked the same question when they went into the stable on that first Christmas Day: "What Child is this?" But no one had an adequate answer. Mary, you remember, "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart," {Luke 2:19 KJV}. She did not know what the answer was. You never can answer that question until you have the full record unfolded in the Gospel accounts of the silent years in Nazareth and the coming of age of Jesus, his baptism by John, the trudging up and down the hills of Galilee and Judea with his disciples, the teaching, the miracles, and finally, the last crowded dramatic week in Jerusalem that culminated in the cross and the blazing glory of resurrection.

And then it still was not over. There was the moment in Jerusalem when the Spirit was poured out upon the waiting disciples. The whole city was gathered to hear the great sound of a rushing wind in the wonder of Pentecost. It is only then you begin to get a full answer to this question, "What Child is this?"

For our Christmas meditation this morning I would like to read four verses out of the opening words of the Epistle to the Hebrews. These verses answer better than anything else in the Scriptures the question that is on the lips of those who come, "What Child is this?"

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs. {Heb 1:1-4 RSV}

Clearly, the central declaration of that passage is the twice repeated phrase "God spoke" to man. In times past he spoke by the prophets but now, the writer says, "he has spoken to us by a Son." That indicates that the answer to the question "What Child is this?" is that this Baby lying in Mary's lap in Bethlehem is the ultimate, the complete word of God to mankind. We never again will have God speaking to man after this birth at Bethlehem and the story of the life of Jesus. All that God wants to say has been said, and it is only up to us to

hear and to heed what he says. That is why for twenty centuries we have never had another event like this, for God has spoken to us in his Son.

John begins his Gospel on the same note. He says,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... all things were made by him and without him was not any thing made that was made. {John 1:1, 1:3 RSV}

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth. {John 1:14 KJV}

In the passage in Hebrews the writer surrounds this statement that Jesus is the word of God with certain phrases that give five great reasons why the child at Bethlehem is God's final word to men. I want to simply point them out to you and we will let that be the basis of our meditation.

The first one is in the very first sentence,

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets. {Heb 1:1 RSV}

When you open the Old Testament you are reading the Word of God spoken to the fathers by the prophets. And it is a fascinating version. I hope you have come to understand and really value the Old Testament. What a marvelous book! How many different ways God spoke in that book -- in dreams, in visions, in sudden appearances -- in that wonderful act of inspiration that nobody fully understands where somebody speaking the words that come to his mind and heart is uttering the words of God.

And it comes to us in many different forms, as the writer of Hebrews says. You open Genesis and you have first, the very straightforward but majestic and moving tale of creation, of the fall, and of the flood. This is followed by the simple narrative of the lives of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then the story of Moses and the Exodus, and the thunderings of the Law, coming at last to the sweet singing of the Psalmist, the homespun wisdom of Proverbs, and the delicate tenderness of the Song of Solomon. Then the rest of the Old Testament is filled with the exalted visions of the prophets, these mighty men who spoke to times of crisis in the nation and yet lifted their eyes up and saw far beyond the horizons of time to great events that God was going to bring into being when the seasons rolled around.

Yet, when you finish the book, and you have heard all the matchless oratory of the prophets, you still realize that God's voice has not answered the deep questions of the human heart. It is only when you open the Gospels and begin to read of Jesus, who he was, what he did, where he went, what he said, how he acted, how he lived and the way he handled situations, that all the utterance of the prophets begins to merge into one great voice and we get God's final word to mankind. That is why I love the Sermon on the Mount so. I think it is the greatest message men have ever been privileged to hear. I hope you will spend 1979 studying it, reading again this marvelously condensed and purified statement of all that God wants man to know about life.

Not far away from where I used to live in Montana is what is called "The Three Forks" of the Missouri River, the place where three rivers flow together to form the Missouri. They rise up in the mountains in the western part of the State of Montana and they form this great river, the Missouri, that flows on down through Montana and then into North Dakota, South Dakota, through Missouri, and join the Mississippi along with the Ohio. Altogether this forms the greatest river system and drainage network that the world knows anything about. Now all these rivers drain out of hills and valleys and mountain ranges that are far separated from one another, and I always think of that when I think of the way the Old Testament has flowed together to form the one great voice that speaks in the New. All the various themes that God introduces to mankind in the Old Testament are brought together in the voice of Jesus. He is God's final word to man, greater than the prophets, fulfilling everything they have written.

Then the writer here points out that it is a greater word because Jesus forms, he says, the boundaries of

history,

... but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. {Heb 1:2 RSV}

Now there is the beginning in the past: "He created the world"; there is the end of the future: He is "the heir of all things." When the writer says that he is looking on to the end of time. Every now and then someone says to me, "Where is all of this going to end? Are we in the last days? Is this the time when God is going to bring human history to a jolting, crashing end?" The answer, of course, is, "Maybe." But there is coming an end. If you want to know what it is, read what Jesus says: Read Matthew 24; read Luke 21; read Mark 13. There you have the words of the Son of God himself as to what is going to happen. It will all end, he says, when the Son of Man returns in his glory and establishes his kingdom upon the earth. He is awaiting us there at the end of time. He is "the heir of all things."

But he is not only the end of the future, he is the beginning of the past. Look backwards to the very creation and there you find him. The most wonderful thing that the Christmas story brings before us is this almost unbelievable statement that the Baby who lies in Mary's arms in a smelly cave in Bethlehem is the One who created the entire universe.

These nights I have been enjoying soaking in the hot tub out in our back yard and I have had an opportunity to study the winter sky as never before. I have watched Orion striding through the heavens, and the planet Venus as it visibly moves across the sky, and remembered that man is now trying to discover what is going on on Venus. We have launched some of these contraptions to go up there and report back to us what is happening. It is fascinating to watch Venus and imagine those machines, made on earth by the lowest bidder, and wonder if they are going to make it as they circle the planet.

But the thing that is most amazing of all is to remember that all that vast universe with its teeming millions of galaxies -- it takes hundreds of thousands of light years to cross even one of them -- was brought into being by the hand of the One who lies as a Babe at Mary's breast in Bethlehem! That is the universal testimony of Scripture, by prediction in the Old Testament, by the statement of the Gospels, and by the declaration of the apostles afterward. The whole of the Christian society came to recognize that great truth that the One who lay there in Bethlehem was the Creator of the world. He brackets all of time; Jesus stands at the end of every path upon which every creature and every human being who ever lived travels.

Now, not only that, but the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus is the complete word of God because he is the master of the present as well. He puts it this way,

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by the word of his power. {Heb 1:3 RSV}

That is an amazing statement. It is put in the present tense, saying that he is the One who is keeping things going right now.

Stanford University, nearby, is the site of the Stanford Linear Accelerator, that mighty two-mile long atom smasher that runs back into the hills. It is a great lever with which scientists hope to pry the lid off the secrets of matter and discover what is in the miniature world of the atom, the neutron, and the proton, etc. And some amazing things are coming out. They are finding secrets they never knew existed, they are discovering a complexity they never dreamed of, and they are finding particles that they cannot even invent enough names for. But one thing they are consistently discovering is that there is some strange force that holds everything together. They do not know what to call it, and they do not know how to identify it. They talk about a kind of "cosmic glue" that holds things together. Isn't it fascinating that here in the Word of God you have that exact kind of terminology used of Jesus of Nazareth! If you want a name for the force that holds the universe together it is very simple: His name is Jesus. He sustains the universe by the word of his power, or as Colossians puts it, "all things are held together by him," {cf, Col 1:17b RSV}.

That is not only true of the physical universe, including our bodies and all that we are, but it is true of all the

other forces and powers in the universe -- physical, psychological, social, spiritual, whatever, -- he is in charge of them all. After the resurrection, when our Lord appeared to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, in the most forthright terms, simple, artlessly, he said to them, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" {Matt 28:18b KJV} means he not only controls all the physical forces of the planet and the universe, but he controls all the events that occur upon them. This is something Christians tend to forget. We get so used to seeing things through the secular eyes of the media, and other propaganda forces around us, that we forget that behind the events that fill the pages of our newspapers is a mighty controlling hand that is blending them all together, permitting some things to happen, restraining other things.

I have just been reading for my own enjoyment the story of the life of General Douglas MacArthur. It has been recalling to my mind those turbulent days of World War II when he was the Commander in Pacific; then his moving on to Japan where he became virtually the Emperor; then the days of the Korean War where MacArthur was the Commander there. It has been fascinating to me to relive those days and remember the headlines and the events that seemed so important and significant to us at the time. I remember how angry the whole nation became at President Truman when he dismissed MacArthur, and the tremendous, ecstatic response the General received when he returned, first in San Francisco and later in New York. The whole nation was almost groveling at his feet.

And yet, as I read, those events seem far away and insignificant now. They do not seem to have much bearing on today. I know that these events that capture our attention today are likewise going to seem faded and trivial soon. Now many people are mad at President Carter because of what we regard as the betrayal of Taiwan, but it will all pass. We will soon see these as apparently insignificant events again. Yet they are not without meaning. The Bible tells us a mighty hand is shaping the destiny of nations and of individuals. All of these things have been in the power of him who sustains the universe by the word of his power.

Then the writer takes us even deeper, not only to these physical matters, these external visible things, but he takes us back now into the very depths of the human dilemma -- the problem of human evil. He says,

When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. {Heb 11:3b RSV}

Jesus is the final and complete word of God to man because he has solved the deepest problem in human life -- the problem of human sinfulness. Everybody today is asking, in the face of some of the tragic things that are happening, "What's wrong with humanity? What's wrong with life? Why is the world in a continual mess? Why are our papers filled with murder and violence and hate and corruption and darkness?" We were all shocked by Jonestown, and by the murders of Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Milk. We were aghast with horror reading last night of a woman who drove her car onto the steps of the Statehouse in Trenton, New Jersey, and threw the head of her mother, wrapped in a plastic bag, at a policeman. Why all this murder and violence and evil? The answer of Scripture universally is, "Man's sin," or, to put it even more realistically, and more helpfully, to us, "Man's selfishness." That is what lies at the root of it all, the terrible taint that all of us possess that can never be washed away by our own efforts. Like Lady Macbeth, there are times we all want to cry out, "Out damned spot!" Yet it is never gone.

The amazing declaration of Scripture is that the reason the Creator of the world became the Babe of Bethlehem was that he might make purification for human selfishness, that he might solve the insoluble problem, and wash away the unwashable stain. The good news of Christmas, of course, is that every one of us who has found Christ, who has come to him, and who follows him finds again and again that he has the power to cleanse us. He has the power to put away the guilt of the past, whether it is the past 50 years of life or the past five minutes of time. He has the power to cleanse it, and wash it away, and to set us on our feet again with a clean slate and a fresh page to write on every day, to live life again in the power and the grace of the living God. Now, that is the greatest message of all. When he had made purification for sins (what agony, what terrible hurt is involved in that phrase), he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Jesus is Lord: this was the early creed of the Church and it is the creed of all who come to know him now. He has solved that desperate problem of human life; he is in control and in charge of all human events.

I have always loved the words of the poet, James Russell Lowell, who puts it this way:

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone 'tis strong;
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne.
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows,
Keeping watch above his own.

The writer of Hebrews says the final reason why Jesus is God's last word to man is that he has won the right to the worship of all creation,

... having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs. {Heb 1:4 RSV}

We always associate angels with Christmas. The angel chorus sang the praises of the Baby to the shepherds on that wonderful night when the heavens were opened, but they also are the ones who gather around the throne of the Lamb in the book of Revelation and give praise and glory to him.

I want to read that account now that we might have it before us. It is found in the 5th chapter, Verse 6, where John says:

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song, saying,

**"Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God
from every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on earth."**

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped." {Rev 5:6-14 RSV}

That is the closing scene of all time. That is the one great event toward which the whole creation moves. All the events that crowd our newspapers are working out in some strange way, more mysterious than we can imagine, the end that is described here. Therefore, Christmas means to us the most momentous event the ages have ever seen, when the Lord of Glory became the Babe of Bethlehem in order that we might be delivered from our selfishness. That is what Christmas is all about. It is the opportunity for love to break out in our families, in our homes, among our friends, wherever we are, that the back of evil might be broken in our individual lives and we be set free to be the loving creatures God made man to be. That is why Christmas is always associated with warmth and love and joy and forgiveness, with healing and beauty and light and glory.

I hope, as we close this service, that the gratitude of your hearts will express in your own way in words to God what it means to you to have had the Son of God born in your heart as he was born in the stable at Bethlehem.

Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born,
Until he is born within your heart

Your life is still forlorn.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for the Lord of Glory. It is with very inadequate words that we seek to set forth the amazing wonder that he, the God of Glory, should give himself to come take the place of a helpless child and become a man that he might die for us to set us free and make purification for sins. We thank you for it. We pray that we will never forget it, that we are redeemed creatures, we have no value in ourselves, but in the One who loved us, who gave himself for us. In his name we pray, Amen.

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